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ABSTRACT

A wide variety of charter schools has emerged since the first charter was granted in 1991. Six distinct models include schools managed by grassroots organizations, schools focused on special student populations, schools centered around distance learning or home learning, business-managed schools, schools structured as teacher cooperatives, and schools converted from public schools. This paper focuses on the teacher-cooperative model of charter reform. This model allows teachers to take ownership of their professional services, thus fostering commitment and increasing personal investment in the governance structure. Teachers are afforded the flexibility and independence to customize learning opportunities to meet students' needs. Teachers are "member-owners" of the cooperative. They are responsible for their own school planning and development; payroll, benefit, and fiscal services; teacher preparation and staff development; and other services normally assigned to administrative staff. About 20 percent of the costs normally associated with administrative staffing are eliminated. Although members' workloads increase because of the extra duties assumed, teachers unanimously indicated that they prefer this self-governing professional style of teaching and administration to the traditional "central administration" style of management. A caveat is for cooperative members to monitor their workloads to avoid being overtaxed. (Contains 15 references.) (RT)

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COOPERATIVE CHARTER SCHOOLS: NEW ENTERPRISES IN INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY

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Introduction

Our country is experiencing an unparalleled wave of increased student enrollment in its elementary and secondary schools. Fifty three million children entered public and private schools across the United States at the outset of the 2000-2001 school year, an increase of nearly 18% or 8 million schoolchildren over the last 15 years (United States Department of Education, 2000). We have more children enrolled in schools now than at any other time in our nation's history, and that number is increasing. This record growth in student population translates into new demands on our public education system, including arguably its most critical element, our teachers.

While the enrollment statistics increase, academic achievement is not improving, if not actually falling. The public education system has been failing to accomplish the achievement goals established by state and federal mandates, and American schools have been viewed by many as being in an acute state of crisis since the release of the 1983 report entitled, *A Nation at Risk* (Good & Braden, 2000). Compounding the situation is the fact that the teaching profession is not lucrative enough to attract and retain sufficient numbers of quality teachers to address the enrollment explosion, causing a teacher shortage in our country. Consequently, teachers from other countries are enticed to come teach in our public schools with promises of adventure and better salaries than they could earn in their respective homelands. Often the teachers that are recruited are not required to possess teaching credentials or have an education background, but instead bring professional knowledge or experience to the teaching table. Even with teachers hired from within our own higher education systems we are sometimes forced to compromise and hire subject matter specialists or teachers who lack certification. Teachers are often

hired on a conditional basis, on the stipulation they will pursue certification. Despite these attempts to fill the teaching void in our school systems, our public schools still frequently suffer from over-crowded classrooms, and student-teacher ratios that are higher than ideal. These issues have been cited as factors that contribute to the inability of schools to elicit the desired academic performances from their students.

Concerned parents, teachers, administrators, and legislators recognize the urgency of the education dilemma, yet are able to make little progress toward correcting the situation. During the mid 1990s as efforts were underway to revamp public education, politics, special interest groups, and a myriad of educational fads and schemes confused the reform movement and halted progress toward educational change (Manno, Finn, & Vanourek, 2000). New kinds of schools were created, where traditional organization and administration paradigms were discarded in favor of innovative new management models. Educational reformists even reconsidered the entire foundation of the teaching profession, and how it was administered. Many reform ideas emerge and burn brightly for a brief period, then flame out as disappointing and short-lived attempts at change, but not all. A few attempts at reform are becoming increasingly popular, even effective, and are showing promises that they will withstand the test of time.

Charter Schools

One of the education reform approaches that emerged out of this period was the charter school. Intended to provide educational choice and innovation, charter schools have survived a decade of trial, error, and adjustment. This alternative to traditional public education offers free-market competition in the educational arena, but is publicly funded. Since the first charter was granted in Minnesota in 1991, the charter school

movement has swept across the country at an amazing rate. By the 2000/2001 school year, over 2,300 charter schools enrolled more than 576,000 students across 34 states and the District of Columbia (Center for Education reform, 2001). Today, over half a million children attend a type of school that did not even exist a decade ago (Center for Education Reform, 2001; Schorr, 2000). This rapid growth of charter schools attests to their popularity.

A wide variety of charter schools has emerged, to include at least six distinct models: schools managed by grassroots organizations, schools focused on special student populations, schools centered around distance learning or home learning, business-managed schools, schools structured as teacher cooperatives, and schools converted from public schools (Reason Public Policy Institute, 2002). This discussion focuses on the teacher cooperative model of charter reform.

Charter schools are built around the concepts of ownership and investment – those who choose charter schools must invest their time and effort to make the school successful, and they have the opportunity to "own" their educational direction. The small class size and increased parental involvement that are cornerstones of the charter school movement contribute to greater academic success because they help to personalize the educational experience for the student. Likewise, because charter schools are free from many of the restrictions of traditional public educational systems, teachers feel that they have greater latitude in their teaching practices. Because they are held accountable to the same academic standards as any other public school, charter schools must demonstrate proficiency in designated areas. How each school chooses to accomplish this objective is left to the individual schools, and indeed, to each teacher. The bottom line determining

whether a school's charter will be renewed rests solely on performance, academic as well as fiscal. A school's charter will be revoked or will not be renewed if that school fails to meet the standards established by its governing authority.

There is no doubt that improving overall academic performance in our nation's public schools is a top priority among politicians, legislators, and school administrators. Most states have adopted rigorous minimum proficiency exams as early as the elementary level. These mandatory tests have students, parents, and teachers all striving to achieve the established standards, for different reasons. Students feel great pressure to pass these exams because of the enormous emphasis placed on the results, which are sometimes linked to advancement to the next grade level. Parents experience "testing anxiety" as entire annual curriculums are geared toward the exams, and tension increases exponentially as testing dates approach. Finally, teachers are perhaps the most affected by the demand for academic excellence, because they are ultimately held accountable for the success or failure of their students.

In the desperate search for improved accountability in our public schools, there is great experimentation taking place with school governance structures as well as school organization. Traditionally, public authorities have been responsible not only for setting academic and performance standards, but also for the fiscal and administrative decisions of our public schools. Now, however, American education is being reinvented in an attempt to shift control away from government bureaucracies, and toward the providers of the educational services (Manno, 1998). Although public authorities establish the academic and performance standards, they no longer necessarily deliver the service, run the institutions, employ the teachers, or directly regulate the process. Instead, new

authority structures are emerging that allow autonomy in service delivery mechanisms, and freedom and flexibility in curriculum design, development, and delivery (Hanson, 2001). However, the characteristics that make these new governance mechanisms unique have not been clearly defined, nor has their influence on instructional delivery, let alone student performance, been researched in any depth.

In what follows, one such innovative school governance mechanism – the teacher cooperative charter school – will be discussed in detail, and its strengths and weaknesses will be analyzed. What, if anything, makes teacher cooperatives fundamentally different from traditional school management models? In what ways are the two models similar? The discussion will focus on the difference in the taxonomy of decisions that exists in a teacher cooperative, and will do so by sharing the insights of teachers who have been experiencing this new governance structure.

Teacher Cooperatives as Alternative School Governance Structures

One innovative new school governance model that departs from the traditional school governance model is the teacher cooperative. Pioneered by a group of educators at the Minnesota New Country School (MNCS) in LaSeur, Minnesota, EdVisions Teacher Cooperative was formed in order to empower teachers and make them stakeholders in the educational process. This concept of allowing teachers to take ownership of their professional services is intended to foster commitment, and increase their personal investment, or "buy-in" of the governance structure. This is no small matter, since how governance is structured in a school can have a significant influence on how leaders carry out their jobs, as well as how teachers respond to those leaders (US Charter Schools, 2001).

A teacher cooperative operates on a very different premise from a traditional, top-down administrative system. Teacher cooperatives place responsibility for school-wide performance with every staff member, and encourage innovation in the development of academic programs (McVey, 2000). Teachers are afforded the flexibility and independence to customize learning opportunities to meet the needs of their students. More importantly, this governance model allows the teachers to *own* their services, and to market those services competitively. Based on these principles, the charter school model, with its emphasis on empowering individuals to take control of their educational direction, emerged as the ideal choice for such a governance structure.

The first of these teacher cooperatives was conceived and implemented in a highly successful charter school (MNCS) in 1994, by a group of forward-thinking teachers and administrators. Because of its initial success, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recently awarded a $4.5 million grant to EdVisions to replicate their school governance model by establishing 15 charter schools centered around teacher cooperatives (Hanson, 2001). This grant is designed to recognize and encourage strong leadership throughout the educational system. To date, EdVisions Cooperative member-owners (teachers) provide instructional services and guarantee results through their contracts with seven Minnesota charter schools (Small Schools Project, 2002).

How effective is this new governance model at improving accountability and/or student achievement? In what ways is this approach different from the time-honored practice of school boards managing the teachers they hire and controlling virtually every aspect of their professional practice and development? Are teachers more or less satisfied with the alternative management organization, and is this self-governance model likely to

endure? These are but a few of the issues that will be addressed as we turn now to a comparison of the teacher cooperatives with traditional governance structures.

Employer/Employee Relationships

A teacher cooperative is a special form of worker cooperative, and as such, the teachers are essentially their own employers. Teachers in a cooperative do not receive their paychecks from the sponsoring district, as do teachers in a traditional school system. The sponsor pays the school to hire the teachers, the school pays the cooperative for the teachers' services, and the cooperative pays the teachers. The school board becomes the purchaser of educational services rather than the supplier, structurally in a manner not dissimilar from purchasing services from an independent charter school or from an educational management organization. Members of a teacher cooperative are thus employees of the school, employees of the cooperative itself, and self-employed, as "member-owners." This triple employment aspect allows teachers to gain curricular independence and freedom, as well as governance control without sacrificing the benefits and protections normally associated with traditional teacher employment situations. These rights and benefits are assured because, although there is no relationship between the teachers and the sponsoring district, legislation entitles the cooperative's teachers to the same state retirement benefits as other public school teachers (Hanson, 2001). By marketing their educational services to the school board or governing authority, the members of the cooperative ensure that school administrators are working at the will of the professional educators toward the common goal of achieving performance goals.

Services Provided

In a teacher cooperative, the members decide the quality and quantity of their professional training. They set the school's curriculum, and decide how to spend the school's funds. These teachers "manage" themselves – hiring colleagues, evaluating staff performance, establishing salaries and dismissing teachers who are not meeting expectations (U S Charter Schools, 2001). The philosophy of EdVisions encompasses the belief that teachers should assume new professional roles and create opportunities for further direct involvement in owning and operating educational entities. According to EdVisions, their cooperative members are qualified and willing to provide the following services:

*Charter school planning and development

*Direct instructional services

*Payroll, benefit and fiscal services

*Teacher preparation and staff development

*Academic and program evaluation

*Customized charter school workshops

*Fiscal hosts for grants and contracts

By assuming so many roles ordinarily filled by administrative staff, the cooperative members eliminate about 20 percent of the costs normally associated with staffing for routine administrative duties. Yet with the obvious benefits of increased autonomy come the added burdens of increased workloads. The teacher cooperative delivers a "whole school operation," and this approach requires extra participation from its members. Without the resources of a central administration to perform such logistical duties as

establishing and maintaining insurance and benefits packages, preparation of payrolls, etc., the member owners must each assume additional responsibilities that can be time-consuming and can distract from their mission of teaching. When asked whether this new governance structure has increased or decreased their workloads, EdVisions member-owners unanimously stated that their workload has increased, often dramatically.

"I'm not sure if it's the governance model or the nature of charter schools, but we work more," says MNCS teacher Dean Lind. "We are members of boards, we look over financial reports, we do state reporting, we serve lunch, we take out the garbage....not to mention working with students and parents," Lind explains. Some of the additional duties that teachers assume include additional pay, while others do not. EdVisions teachers choose to wear many hats in order to ensure the success of their businesses – the business they own.

Just because the workload is significantly increased does not mean that the cooperative members would prefer to revert to their former management style. David Greenberg of El Colegio Charter School in Minneapolis describes the trade-off involved: "It appears there is an increase in the workload of most teachers. However this is offset in part with more dollars available for students and for teaching staff that are taking on more of the administrative load." Greenberg goes on to say "Teachers also have the flexibility to design some scheduling into the school that can in some ways compensate for the extra load with some freedoms they did not have in a traditional governance model." Adds Andrea Martin, of Avalon Charter School in St. Paul, Minnesota: "We are not seeing over a hundred students a day. The workload is not more stressful – it is more exciting."

Clearly, when given the choice to enjoy greater professional freedom in exchange for increased responsibilities, the EdVisions teachers do not hesitate.

Contracts

The actual teaching contracts of the EdVisions members contain both similarities to traditional teaching contracts, as well as stark differences. According to the cooperative members, the teaching contracts still contain all the full legal language, but are much simpler and easier to understand. Although they are self-employed, EdVisions teachers must meet the stipulations of their contracts in order to retain their jobs. Lind describes the unique contracts as "At Will" contracts. "The contracts are for one year but beyond a year there is no tenure as such. If you meet the needs of the students and the school you will continue," he explains. When asked who determines whether teachers are meeting the needs of the students and the school, Lind says "Your ability to contribute to the needs of the students and the school is evaluated by the your peers, with feedback from students and peers." These triple-check feedback systems, coupled with the requirements of state proficiency testing, combine to form a rigorous evaluation process that is aimed at improving accountability.

Interestingly, because the EdVisions teachers are their own employers, they determine their own salaries. They do not have to join a union, and must negotiate their contracts internally before submitting them to the local governing authority. Of course, they must bear in mind that they are trying to market their educational services at a competitive price, while at the same time ensuring that teacher salaries are within the overall budget for which they are also responsible. In this unique school management structure, the teachers are the managers of the school as well. Cathy Bierly is the Director of El

Colegio Charter School, which joined the cooperative prior to opening its doors to students last year. She puts this dual-edged salary issue in perspective, explaining, "The staff decides on the budget, therefore we decide on our salaries (if our salaries are too high then we will not have enough money for student projects, field trips, materials, etc.)." Because they are involved in every aspect of the school's planning, EdVisions teachers feel a vested interest to make decisions that will contribute to the success of the entire school, rather than simply serving their own best interests financially. In reality, by ensuring that the school succeeds both financially and academically, these teachers are securing their future employment with that school.

Curriculum

As part of their vision of revitalizing our public education system, members of EdVisions have put into place a number of creative new teaching and learning strategies. Among these strategies are: Performance Outcomes, Total Technology Inclusion, Self-Paced Learning, Full Inclusion, Increased Motivation, Parent Involvement, Curriculum Integration, Multi-Aged Groupings, Individualized Learning, Project-Based Learning, Experiential and Authentic Learning, Community Service and Community Projects, Internships, and Apprenticeships (EdVisions, 2001). According to many of the cooperative members interviewed, this flexibility to control what they teach and how they teach it infuses EdVisions teachers with enthusiasm for their profession.

The self-governing aspect of their organization means that member-owners can effect changes in their classrooms much more rapidly than in a traditional setting. Teachers no longer need to wait for approval on matters concerning curriculum or the delivery of that curriculum. Instead, they must ensure that the curriculum adequately prepares the

students for standardized tests proficiency exams. Lind describes how the governance change has affected the way he and his colleagues approach the development and delivery of curriculum: "Staff take a far more active role in curriculum because they can. If changes are needed, they can be made in days, without the cumbersome process of wading through some bureaucratic quagmire." Students are asked to take a more active role in the development of their educational plans as well. "We do ask our students to take more ownership over their learning, just as we take more ownership over our jobs and school through this model," explains Greenberg. Similarly, Bierly explains, "...the students feel like they have more of a say in their education, and therefore give feedback which can change their academic paths." This illustrates how the idea of empowering individuals with the ability to influence their own educational destinies can be a powerful motivator.

Professional Development

Teachers in traditional educational settings often feel stymied in their professional development efforts, and frequently have little or no say in the type and amount of training they receive. In the EdVisions organization, teachers decide what kinds of training would be beneficial to them as individuals or as a group, and also what types of development might be most beneficial to the school as a whole. Each teacher can pursue his or her own professional development plan, much like the students in these charter schools help develop their own individual learning plans. When asked how he felt the self-governance style had affected the quality and quantity of the staff development training that EdVisions teachers receive, Greenberg replied, "It gives individual teachers much more control over the type of development they get. As EdVisions members we are

part of a greater network that provides training, but teachers also have the ability to say 'I want to attend this training as part of my professional development plan.'" The larger network of which Greenberg speaks refers to the overarching EdVisions Cooperative that provides services in several charter schools. This network of teachers/administrators actually provides training for members within the cooperative who are located at various sites, and relies on the expertise and experience of its members to help new member schools transition into the new governance structure.

EdVisions teachers are encouraged to attend national educational development conferences, just as in any other public educational system. However, EdVisions teachers choose the events that they will attend, and must work to if their requests into their overall budgets. The major difference that Lind sees between him and other attendees at such conferences is that other participants are usually administrators. Because they act in both the teaching and administrative capacities, EdVisions teachers represent more than just themselves when they attend such proceedings.

Accountability

As service providers, EdVisions members guarantee success, and are willing to stake their jobs on that guarantee. They must achieve the standards established in the school's charter, or the school will cease to operate, and they will be unemployed. Because charter schools are relatively new, they are often scrutinized more intensely than their traditional public school counterparts, and are perhaps held to an even higher standard in terms of academic results. In other words, charter schools are expected to produce immediate and significant results based on their promises of innovation and improvement.

The value of assuming educational and professional ownership is far-reaching for these self-governing cooperatives. That sense of entrepreneurship extends beyond individual classroom successes. As Greenberg states, "This organization really drives home the idea, however, that we are like small business owners and are accountable for its [the school's] success." Likewise, "If the school fails, we have only ourselves to blame," adds Martin. It is also imperative that the accountability burden is equally distributed among the members, and that no person or groups of persons feel overwhelmed with additional responsibilities. The success of the venture relies on a true team effort from the cooperative member-owners.

Taking that concept of ownership even further, MNCS teacher Lind describes how personal and professional pride combine to motivate EdVisions teachers to take advantage of the opportunities to influence academic reform that this governance model affords them: "It is embarrassing to come to a school board meeting and have to explain lack of student achievement. But more than that it is personally disappointing, and serves as motivation ... when we see a need to improve – and in this setting we can make changes that can result in improvement."

Implications for the Future

The EdVisons members surveyed unanimously indicated that they prefer this self-governing professional style of teaching and administration to the traditional "central administration" style of management. Yet, as mentioned earlier, reform issues are far too frequent and short-lived. What factors improve an initiative's longevity? It is true that the EdVisions Cooperative members feel that they are in a superior professional situation, and that they have gained autonomy in the new governance model. But the model is still

relatively new, and what steps can be taken to ensure that it does not fall by the wayside as just another reform fad?

First, it is fortunate that the program has received a grant to replicate the cooperative model in other schools, although it is as yet unclear if such a model of school governance will proliferate without external start-up funding. While the opinions of a group of educational professionals from a single site offer scant empirical evidence that this model represents a superior governance structure, they do suggest positive results from this experiment. Although the teacher cooperative model is still in its infancy, the initial poll indicates that the cooperative member-owners support the new governance model, and view it as a positive change.

Secondly, the members of these teacher cooperatives are going to need to carefully monitor their workloads, and the number of additional duties that they assume. Even the finest of educators can lose their enthusiasm when they have been taxed beyond their limits for extended periods of time. Perhaps as these cooperatives gain popularity and achieve more financial success, they can allocate funds solely dedicated to finance some of the administrative positions within their organizations. Although they are then creating a miniature administrative staff that is separate from the teaching staff, the teachers would still retain control of how those responsibilities were fulfilled. More importantly, the duties would be performed at the school level, rather than at the central administration level.

Lastly, in order to gain broad-based support in the educational community, this model will have to be applied in other public school settings other than charter schools. The same principles that contributed to the satisfaction and success of these first few pilot

charter school programs should be, in theory, equally applicable in traditional settings, but an actual example does not yet exist to our knowledge. The practical difficulty will be in convincing local school boards that they can indeed relinquish some control of the administrative and governance functions and still obtain the academic results they seek.

This cooperative governance model has many merits and distinct advantages over the traditional school governance model, although this type of organizational structure will not be universally valued. As one EdVisions member stated, "This setting does require a different personality to truly appreciate it and survive." For many teachers and administrators, this cooperative model is a welcome breath of fresh air in the educational community, and it is worth nurturing and developing. More research on this model is necessary before it can viably be defined as a legitimate long-term alternative governance structure that can be successful in different educational settings and with significant numbers of teachers. Those who support this model are most likely to promote it, both publicly and privately, thereby influencing the growth in the number of teacher cooperatives. Although it is too soon to ascertain the long-run growth potential of this governance model, it is not too soon to monitor the growing base of experience in teacher cooperatives and their potential for addressing some of the long-standing systems problems associated with American public schooling.

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